

UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF AWE IN RELIGIOSITY

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

by

MARCUS K. CHUR

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Approved by Research Advisor:

Dr. Joshua Hicks

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ABSTRACT

Understanding the Role of Awe in Religiosity

Marcus K. Chur
Department of Psychology & Brain Sciences
Texas A&M University

Research Advisor: Dr. Joshua Hicks
Department of Psychology & Brain Sciences
Texas A&M University

Literature Review

Religion gives people a core set of beliefs and values. Studies have shown that there is a strong positive relationship between a person's self-perceived Meaning in Life (MIL) and religiosity.

Thesis Statement

Religiosity will moderate the relationship between Awe experiences and a person's self-perceived MIL.

Theoretical Framework

For our research, we will be conducting an experimental study. We will manipulate the experiences of Awe compared to a controlled condition. We will assess mattering, intrinsic value, and Meaning in Life after the manipulation.

Project Description

The purpose of the study aimed at looking at how religiosity moderated the relationship between Awe experience and facets of MIL. The study's sample included 257 undergraduate students from a southern university enrolled in an introductory psychology course.

INTRODUCTION

There has been growing interest understanding is the role of religion in a person's Meaning in Life (MIL). This paper will illustrate how Awe experiences have differing effects between religious and non-religious persons on MIL. To show this, the present study will look at how religion moderates the relationship between Awe experiences and different facets of MIL.

Literature Review

Religiosity, a strong devotion to religion, is recognized as a central source of meaning in life, it provides individuals with core beliefs, expectations, and goals, and it places the individual's life into a larger, more ultimate context (Batson & Stocks, 2004). Religion also serves as an individual's core schema, informing beliefs about themselves, the world around them, and their interactions (McIntosh, 1995). There have been theorists who argued that religion grows out of a human need for understanding of the deepest problems of existence (Geertz & Banton, 1996). Researchers have found that religion, as a meaning system, affects how people understand themselves and helps make reality understandable and bearable (Silberman, 2005; Paragament, 1997); it also helps individuals understand both mundane and extraordinary occurrences (Spilka, Hood, Hunsberger, & Gorsuch, 2003). Religion plays a central role in the purpose of many people, it provides individuals with the ultimate motivation and goals for living, and the prescriptions and guidelines for achieving those goals (Baumeister, 1991; Pargament, 1997).

Awe is defined as an emotion of wonder in response to something vast and beyond comprehension, it involves a challenge to or negation of mental structures when they fail to make sense of an experience of something vast. These experiences can be disorienting and even

frightening to a person; they could make a person feel small, powerless, and confused (Keltner & Haidt, 2003). Awe requires accommodation for an individual to feel enlightened instead of fearful (Keltner & Haidt, 2003). The accommodation of Awe experiences is best explained by the Piagetian process of adjusting a person's mental processes when they cannot assimilate a foreign or new experience (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969). Accommodation involves confusion and obscurity (Burke, 2009), and it peaks in times of crisis, where current traditions and knowledge structures or belief systems are not enough (Weber, 1978). The accommodation of Awe does not have to be satisfied, they can either be successful, where an individual feels enlightened, or unsuccessful, where an individual feels fearful (Keltner & Haidt, 2003). Experiencing Awe can also increase religious belief as individuals would be motivated to reduce feelings of uncertainty (Valdesolo & Graham, 2014).

MIL has been defined in a variety of ways but there has not been a consensus definition of the construct (Hicks & King, 2008). In our study, we will break MIL into two facets, mattering and intrinsic value, to help elucidate the complex relationship between Awe and Religiosity.

Mattering refers to the degree which an individual feels that his or her existence is of significance, importance, and value to the world (Becker, 1997; King et al., 2006). For a person to experience mattering, they would have to feel that their entire life and actions are consequential; while an individual with a low sense of mattering would feel that their existence is not relevant and not existing would make little difference in the world in the grand scheme of things (George & Park, 2016).

The intrinsic value of something is said to be the value that it has "in itself," "for its own sake," "as such," or "in its own right." (Zimmerman, 2008). In this study, intrinsic value, as it

relates to MIL, means that a person appreciates life for the sake of it. To intrinsically value life would be to appreciate it with no conditions attached. An individual who has a high sense of intrinsic value for life would be more inclined to enjoy its pleasantries as well as be more inclined to help another individual for no reason, benefit, or cost.

Prior Research

Prior research has shown that there is strong support for the association between religion and MIL. Studies have shown strong positive relationships between self-reported MIL and intrinsic religiousness (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006), and general measures of religiousness (Hicks & King, 2008; Steger & Frazier, 2005). But there has not been any prior research regarding how religion relates to the different facets of MIL, specifically intrinsic value and sense of mattering.

There is no direct relationship between Awe and MIL; however, Awe increases happiness which increases MIL, but Awe also increases feelings of small self, which decreases MIL (Rivera et al. in print). Many general definitions of Awe have been given, but there has been little research done on it. Research on wonder (Frijda, 1986), which is similar to Awe, has been conducted, but ultimately there has been little research regarding the manipulation of Awe. Prior research has yet to show how religion moderates the relationship between Awe and the different facets of MIL.

In addition, prior research has yet to compare how Awe is experienced differently between religious and non-religious persons. This is important as scholars constantly try to further their understanding of how a person's religiosity influences their MIL. This research will take a unique perspective to understand this relationship. Our project will be the first to look at

how religiosity moderates the relationship between Awe experiences and MIL. We also want to explore the implications of those differences.

Present Study

The current study explores the idea that there are different facets, intrinsic value and mattering, of the construct MIL, and how these facets factor into whether a person's life is meaningful. The study will also look at how religiosity moderates the relationship between each facet of MIL and Awe experiences. We predict that:

H1: Religiosity will promote a person's intrinsic value more after experiencing Awe.

H2: Awe will negatively affect a person's sense of mattering; religious persons will experience a low sense of mattering and non-religious/less religious persons will experience an even lower sense of mattering.

In this study, participants would either watch a video that mimics an Awe experience or a video that is a neutral stimulus. After watching the video, participants will answer a questionnaire that assesses their intrinsic value, sense of mattering, and religiosity. We will then compare the results between religious and non-religious participants.

PART I

METHODS

Summary

The study was an exploratory correlational study in which participants were asked to complete a variety of questionnaires after watching a video that manipulated Awe or a neutral video on the computer in a lab

Participants

In this experiment, 260 undergraduates from a university's introductory psychology course student pool (SONA) were recruited to participate. The final sample consisted of 257 participants (178 females, 77 males, and 2 others/unknown). The average age of the participants was 19.13 years old ($SD = .96$, range 18-23).

Measures and Procedure

Participants were first directed to a website featuring the study's survey. Once they consented to the study, participants were told they were going to watch a short video and answer questions about the video and themselves.

Video Manipulation

Individuals were randomly assigned to either the experimental or control conditions. The participants in the experimental condition watched a video of the introduction to BBC's Planet Earth series, which manipulated Awe. On the other hand, participants in the neutral condition watched a video about woodworking. After watching the assigned video, participants had to answer questions regarding the quality of the video to ensure there were no technical issues (e.g. I experienced no issues with the video, I could not hear the video). The experimental condition's

video contained camera sweeps over Earth's landscapes including mountains, plains, waterfalls, and deserts, accompanied by inspiring music. For the control condition, the video showed a man explaining how to build a wooden countertop by correctly measuring and cutting wood; there was no music to accompany the video.

Meaning in Life

Participants completed four questions (2 reversed) from Costin's and Vignoles MIL scale (Costin & Vignoles, 2019), which was inspired or adapted from the MLQ-P (Steger et al., 2006) and from the Perceived Personal Meaning Scale (PPMS; Wong, 1998). The questions were "My entire existence is full of meaning" and "My life as a whole has meaning", while there were two reversely scored questions were "My life is meaningless" and "My existence is empty of meaning". The questions were rated on a seven-point scale (1 = "Strongly Disagree, 7 = "Strongly Agree").

Intrinsic Value

On twelve questions (3 reversed), participants were assessed on how much they intrinsically valued life. Examples of the questions included "I tend to find myself deeply engaged in conversations with other people" and "I acquire happiness simply by living my life" while examples of the reverse worded questions were "I often find life to be boring" and "I find most social interactions to be mundane". The questions were rated on a seven-point scale (1 = "Strongly Disagree, 7 = "Strongly Agree").

Mattering

Fourteen questions (2 reversed) were used to assess participants on how much they felt they mattered. Examples of the questions were "My existence is valuable to me" and "My life is of personal importance" while examples of reverse worded questions were "My existence is not

significant in the grand scheme of things” and “Given the vastness of the universe, my life does not matter”. The questions were rated on a seven-point scale (1 = “Strongly Disagree, 7 = “Strongly Agree”).

Mood

Participants were assessed on their current emotional state by answering 26 items adapted from The Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). It included 13 negative affect items (e.g., “Stressed”) and 13 positive affect items (e.g., “Excited”). The items were rated on a five-point scale (1 = “Very slightly or not at all, 7 = “Extremely”). Separate positive and negative affect composites were computed.

Desire to Experience Awe

Two questions asked participants about their attitudes towards the video which measured their desire to experience Awe (e.g. “How much would you want to watch the video you saw earlier again, sometime in the future?” and “How much would you want to watch something similar to the video you saw earlier again in the future?”). The questions were rated on a four-point scale (1 = “Not at all, 4 = “A great deal”).

Attention Check

Four items asked participants if they had paid attention to the video (e.g. “I wasn't paying full attention when I was watching the video”). The questions were rated on a seven-point scale (1 = “Not at all, 7 = “All the time”).

Demographics

Participants were asked to fill in their demographic information which included their gender identity, age, current year in college, race/ethnicity, etc.

Religiosity

In the demographics part of the survey, participants were required to rate their own religiosity on an eleven-point scale question (1 = “Not religious at all, 11 = “Very religious”). Participants also selected which religion that best describes their religious beliefs from eight possible options (e.g. “Christian (please specify denomination)”, “Atheist”, “Other (please specify)”).

After completing the demographics part of the study, the participants were then thanked for taking part in the study and were subsequently debriefed.

PART II

RESULTS

To compute the results, multiple regressions were carried out to investigate whether the experiment conditions (Awe experience) and religiosity could predict participants' intrinsic value, sense of mattering, and total MIL. The results showed that there was a statistically significant main effect between the condition and intrinsic value ($\beta = .14, p < .05$), as well as a statistically significant main effect between religiosity and intrinsic value ($\beta = .23, p < .05$). However the interaction between religiosity and condition was not statistically significant ($\beta = .43, p > .05$). Thus, our first hypothesis was not supported.

There was not a statistically significant main effect between condition and sense of mattering ($\beta = .04, p > .05$), but there was a statistically significant main effect for religiosity and sense of mattering ($\beta = .39, p < .05$). The interaction between condition and religiosity was also not statistically significant ($\beta = .08, p > .05$). Thus, our second hypothesis was also not supported.

For MIL, there was not a statistically significant main effect between condition and overall MIL ($\beta = .04, p > .05$), but a statistically significant main effect between religiosity and overall MIL ($\beta = .33, p < .05$). Finally, the interaction between condition and religiosity was found not to be statistically significant ($\beta = .09, p > .05$).

We analyzed if there is a relationship between the individual variables of intrinsic value, mattering, overall MIL, and religiosity. As shown in Table 1, there was a strong positive relationship between overall MIL and intrinsic value ($r(255) = .73, p < .001$), as well as mattering ($r(255) = .77, p < .001$). There was also a positive relationship between religiosity and

intrinsic value ($r(255) = .22, p < .001$), mattering ($r(255) = .40, p < .001$), and overall MIL ($r(255) = .30, p < .001$).

Table 1. Correlations.

		Intrinsic Value	Mattering	Overall MIL	Religiosity
Intrinsic Value	Pearson Correlation	1	.796**	.726**	.221**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000	.002
	N	257	257	257	257
Mattering	Pearson Correlation	.796**	1	.769**	.397**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000	.000
	N	257	257	257	257
Overall MIL	Pearson Correlation	.726**	.769**	1	.301**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000		.000
	N	257	257	257	257
Religiosity	Pearson Correlation	.221**	.397**	.301**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.002	.000	.000	
	N	257	257	257	257

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

PART III

DISCUSSION

We conducted an exploratory study to find out if religiosity moderated the relationship between Awe experiences and Meaning in Life (MIL). The purpose of this study is to explore the idea that there are different facets, intrinsic value and mattering, of the construct MIL and find out how these facets factor into whether a person's life is meaningful.

Our study was not able to find a significant difference between religious and non-religious persons' intrinsic value after experiencing Awe. We also found that non-religious participants did not have a significantly lower sense of mattering than religious participants after experiencing Awe. Thus, our original hypotheses, that religiosity would promote one's intrinsic value more after an Awe experience, and that Awe experiences would negatively affect a person's sense of mattering and even more so in non-religious persons, were not supported.

Implications

The results do not support our original hypotheses; however, there are some interesting findings from the result. It was found that Awe did predict a person's intrinsic value, but it did not predict a person's sense of mattering or overall MIL. Another interesting finding was that religiosity did predict intrinsic value, mattering, and overall MIL, these findings are consistent with findings from previous studies (Steger et al., 2006; Hicks & King, 2008; Steger & Frazier, 2005).

The correlations between the individual variables also provided some interesting findings, showing that intrinsic value and mattering were strongly related to overall MIL. This shows that our facets do indeed play a role in overall MIL. There were also positive correlations

between religiosity and intrinsic value, mattering, and overall MIL, with the correlation between religiosity and mattering being the strongest. This means religiosity does indeed affect a person's overall MIL and further research will be needed to truly understand the nature of this relationship.

Limitations

Although the results of the study do provide some promising insights, there are several limitations in the experiment that could have affected the results. Perhaps the main limitation for this study was the replication of Awe experiences. Our Awe eliciting experience was artificial as participants watched the video through a computer monitor with headphones depicting vast scenes of nature instead of experiencing the wonders of them in person. This could have negatively affected our results as our Awe experience might not have as strong an effect on the participants as a real outdoor Awe experience would. This could have potentially diluted our results.

Another limitation for this study was that the sample of participants was relatively small and not very representative. The study had a very unequal distribution of genders, with males being significantly outnumbered (77 males, 178 females, and 2 others/unknown). This could have negatively affected the study as it could mean that these results were more representative of a female population instead of a population with an equal distribution of males and females. Outliers in our results could have greatly influenced the results due to the relatively small study sample. A way to improve this would be to increase the number of people in the sample and have a more equal distribution of genders in future studies.

A possible limitation of the study was that it could have suffered from social desirability bias and fence-sitting. Social desirability bias occurs when participants in our study give answers

to make themselves look good instead of giving truthful responses. Fence-sitting occurs when participants give neutral responses, which would indicate that they do not have an opinion regarding the questions. The questions in our survey could have potentially been controversial to some participants as they involve self-evaluation as they involve the participant's MIL. This would mean participants would select the "neither agree nor disagree" option in the survey instead of giving a truthful response.

Future Directions

Perhaps the most important step to improve the experiment and possibly strengthen the results would be to have real life Awe experiences instead of watching videos that elicit Awe on a computer. Future studies could improve on our manipulation and let participants experience Awe on a larger and more tangible scale. This change might increase the effects of the manipulation, possibly making our original hypotheses true.

The findings from our study show that religiosity plays a role in the facets of MIL, but not so much Awe experiences (only limited to intrinsic value). Future research can have a more focused approach towards religiosity and the facets of MIL and look to understand the nature of that relationship.

Future studies regarding this can try to replicate the experiment on a different demographic. Our study's participants consisted of college undergraduates that were enrolled in psychology classes, this was not a truly representative population. Studies can be run on a more diverse set of participants to see if the results can be generalized to the larger population as well.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, religiosity does not moderate the relationship between Awe and MIL. However, the results of the experiment did provide interesting findings regarding the relationship between religiosity and the different facets of MIL. Overall, our exploratory study into the relationship between religiosity, Awe, and MIL can be considered a good initial step in understanding how Awe and religiosity play a role in a person's MIL.

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